

elicits something very different in you, and you find yourself viewing her with compassion rather than judgment. Maybe the fact that she doesn't seem able to control herself calls for mercy rather than derision. "She just can't seem to control herself" first draws forth judgment but then gives way to something very different.

It is always worth being conscious of the ways we tend to dismiss people we don't like for the very same shortcomings we readily forgive in people we do — or, for that matter, in ourselves. (For some people the reverse is just as hard to internalize: We sometimes mercilessly condemn ourselves for failings we might well regard as eminently forgivable in others). Maybe, like the God of this story, we need to learn that our evaluations of people depend on more than just the facts about their nature or character; they also depend on what posture we adopt toward those facts.

Needless to say, it is not always easy to know when judgment is appropriate, or when mercy should trump it. The tension between judgment and mercy is one that Judaism imagines even God finds difficult to negotiate, so there is no reason to expect that we will find it simple. But God's change of heart after the flood reminds us of something crucial: Where there is judgment, there is often also the possibility of compassion.

But our parashah teaches us more than just that we can be forgiving toward people for the same reasons we are inclined to condemn them — though that in itself is actually quite a lot. Genesis also wants us to think about who and what God is in relation to us. God allows the world to persist after the flood not because human beings are so wonderful — or because God is so naive — but because God is compassionate and merciful. As Bible scholar Walter Brueggemann memorably puts it, "The only thing the waters of chaos and death do not cut through (though they cut through everything else) is the commitment of God to creation."²⁴ The world (and the covenant) endures because of divine mercy. From a religious perspective, the creation of the world is a manifestation of divine grace and generosity — but so also is the per-

istence of it in the face of so much cruelty and callousness. The fact that the world continues to exist is thus grounds for deep gratitude.

From the Torah's perspective, as Bible scholar Walter Moberley wisely observes, "humanity remains undeserving of the gift of manageable life in a regular world order; but the gift is given nonetheless. . . . [God's] forbearance, rightly understood, should lead not to complacency . . . [but] to the living of life in a way that recognizes its quality as gift."²⁵